

MODULE 7: Distraction



STUDENT WORKSHEET

Read the interview below with Russell White, Founder of the Australian Road Safety Foundation. Russell outlines important points about the growing issue of driver distraction and what we can do about it. Underline the distractions mentioned and keep note of some of the actions that reduce risk on the next page.

Interview with Russell White, Founder of the Australian Road Safety Foundation

What are some of the biggest issues with driving on the road today?

RW: With the pressures of daily life being what they are, it seems that we're more or less expected to be able to do more than one thing at a time. This "multi-tasking" culture also continues when we get behind the wheel and that's a big problem.

Inattention is one of the leading contributing factors when it comes to traffic crashes. So, what is inattention? It basically means being distracted from the task at hand. I'm sure we've all seen distracted drivers doing things like programming the satellite navigation unit, changing a music track, daydreaming, checking out things by the roadside, getting dressed, putting on makeup and eating. These are just a few examples. All of these types of activities distract the driver from the driving task and compromise their focus or situational awareness.

Are mobile phones distractions?

RW: Of course, we can't fully cover this topic without discussing the use of mobile phones. You might think about your phone as the key to your life. But it is a major distraction for you when you are on the road. It is illegal to use a hand-held mobile phone whilst driving and with very good reason. There are also additional restrictions on L and P plate drivers. These restrictions are there because you already have a heavy workload with driving at this early stage, and distraction only complicates things further.

Why are mobile phones such a distraction?

RW: It all comes down to workload. Humans cannot multitask, we process things sequentially. That means we can't focus on two tasks at the same time. Research shows that when drivers are using a mobile phone their ability to focus and deal with what is going on around them is greatly impacted. This results in people spending considerable amounts of time not looking at the road ahead because they are engaging with the device, looking down at a screen or pre-occupied with some aspect of the device. We see issues like poor lane positioning, increased reaction times and people not being aware of what's going on around them.

What about hands-free mobile phones?

RW: The potential risk with mobile phones doesn't just sit with handheld operations. It also extends to hands-free use as well. The key problem surrounding mobiles and driving is the distraction that the conversation itself causes, hands-free or not. So, while it may still be legal to use a hands-free unit, it would be a good idea to think about the implications any phone conversation could have on your driving.

What advice can you give young Australians, our future drivers?

RW: The best advice is to leave the phone off when you drive and let the calls go to your message bank.

What is the reality of this situation?

RW: Mobile devices are a large part of our daily lives, but we need to understand that there are times when you can't afford to be distracted. Driving or being on a road is one of those times. The reality is that we can't split our concentration between two tasks. It's not possible to do two things at once without compromising your focus. When you're behind the wheel you need to focus on just one job, driving the car. Everything else is a distraction that could have catastrophic consequences.

Thank you for your time today.